# ELISE OU LA VRAIE VIE

Claire Etcherelli

Twentieth Century Texts

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# TWENTIETH CENTURY FRENCH TEXTS

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Claire Etcherelli

# ELISE OU LA VRAIE VIE

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# CONTENTS

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# INTRODUCTION

## THE AUTHOR

Claire Etcherelli was born in Bordeaux on 11 January 1934. Her father was a docker. In 1942 he was arrested by the Germans and deported; later that year he was shot. Claire went to live with her grandfather in the Basque region of France. In 1943 she returned to Bordeaux and became a *pupille de la nation,* which meant that her education and welfare were paid for by the state as she was a war orphan. She was educated at a church school in Bordeaux and was a very able pupil. She spoke of her youth in an interview with Francine Mallet (*Le Monde,* 22 November 1967):

> Dès mon enfance, j'ai été marquée terriblement; toute ma jeunesse s'est passée dans une grande solitude forcée, d'abord amère. Je souffrais de tout; de mes vêtements, de ma gaucherie…. Je souffrais surtout d'être retranchée des autres élèves du pensionnat élégant où, grâce à une bourse de pupille de la nation, j'ai été élevée, mais où la différence des milieux sociaux créaient des barrières infranchissables pour moi. Après, c'est moi-même qui me suis retranchée des autres volontairement. J'ai cherché à me singulariser: par exemple, en ne me présentant pas au bac…. Depuis l'âge de trois ans je cherche dans l'écriture un plaisir, un refuge.

She left school and married when she was eighteen. She began writing seriously in 1953 but her first works were turned down by publishers. When she was twenty-two her first child, a son, was born. A year later her marriage broke up. In 1957 she moved to Paris with her child and found work in the Citroën car plant. She stayed there for seventeen

months, then went to work in another factory before getting a job in a travel agency. This work was less physically exhausting than her labour in the factories and allowed her the time and energy to begin writing again. She started what was to become *Elise ou la vraie vie* in 1960 and took over three years to write it.

The manuscript was rejected by several publishers before an influential intellectual figure in Paris, Maurice Nadeau, editor of the series *Lettres nouvelles* for the publisher Denoël, accepted the novel and it was published in 1967. The previous year, Claire Etcherelli had remarried. Her husband was Mohamed Cherchelli, Director of Tourism for Algeria. Their marriage was short-lived and when the novel came out, the author was living alone with her two sons (the second was born in 1961).

*Elise ou la vraie vie* won wide acclaim and the author became the object of a great deal of attention. The most important immediate coverage was an article by Claude Lanzman in the widely read and influential magazine *Elle* (16 November 1967). This was followed a week later by a lengthy interview with Simone de Beauvoir published in the left-wing weekly *Le Nouvel Observateur*. Both writers noted the feminist interest of the novel and the authenticity of its tone; they saw it largely as an indictment of the social ethos of male superiority and an attack on the economic structure of a society which exploited the powerless, by subjecting them to dehumanizing conditions of work in order to produce goods for the affluent. Over the next few weeks the novel gained further publicity and Claire Etcherelli received a number of literary and intellectual accolades, including an interview and favourable review in the prestigious daily newspaper *Le Monde*. The culmination came when *Elise ou la vraie vie* won a major literary prize, the *Prix Femina,* in November *1961*. The *Figaro Littéraire* (10 December 1967) declared that the vote reflected a right-left split among the members of the jury. The reviews certainly seem to bear this out. The extreme right-wing weekly *Minute* (30 December 1967) responded to the award of the prize with the headline ‘Fatima Fémina’ and their reviewer, like many on the right, deplored the book’s sympathetic treatment of the Algerians and concluded that the novel was anti-French and endorsed terrorism. On the left the book was praised for its portrayal of racism and the dehumanizing effects of work practices in mass-production factories. Generally the reviews tended to focus on the documentary value of the novel; for example, the reviewer in *Le Parisien* (28 November 1967) called it ‘un reportage plutôt qu’un roman’, and Philippe Sénart in the *Revue de Paris* dismissed the novel

as ‘du Zola récrit par Sagan!’ However, both before and after the *Fémina* prize, some reviewers were more generous and closer to the opinion expressed by Dominique Aury in the *Nouvelle Revue française* (1 January 1982), ‘le récit simple et droit…fait honte et inspire le respect’.

Interest in the novel and its author revived when the film version, directed by Michel Drach, came out in November 1970. It received enthusiastic reviews, though once again the response was largely determined by the political allegiance of the reviewer.

Since then Claire Etcherelli has continued to work part-time in a travel agency and to write novels. She has published two further works, *A propos de Clémence* (1971) and *Un Arbre voyageur* (1978). Though well received by critics these novels did not command the same degree of attention and public response as her first novel. Both are variations on the quest for ‘la vraie vie’. At the same time she seems to have wanted to extend her narrative technique and both novels have a more ambitious formal structure than *Elise ou la vraie vie*.

In her second novel Claire Etcherelli once more makes a woman, Gabrielle Fardoux, her main character. The main theme of the novel is the difficulty of knowing oneself and the impossibility of knowing another person; the political and social context of the novel is very much subservient to this theme. The final lines of the novel reinforce the point as Gabrielle, once more alone, reflects that: ‘Quelques années plus tôt se promettant de tenir une espèce de journal qui partirait de sa jeunesse et se terminerait à sa mort, elle avait commencé ainsi: “Abritée derrière mon apparence je demeure invisible à tous. Qui me connaît?”.’ *A propos de Clémence* is a carefully constructed novel but its artifice is unconvincing, it produces insubstantial characters whose predicaments remain somewhat abstract for the reader.

*Un Arbre voyageur* is in two parts. The first, much the shorter, is narrated by Anna, a friend of the main character, Milie. The second part develops the story of Milie who has left Paris to live in a run-down house in the country. Within this section there is a long flashback tracing Milie’s childhood and her working-class origins. The novel has a rich network of themes and a variety of narrative styles ranging from the diary-like entries of Anna’s section, to the classic form of the flashback to Milie’s childhood, as well as sections which read like a film script: ‘Milie, la lettre dans la main. Retenant l’espoir, rejetant l’amertume. Bruits de la ville un jour de soleil. Douleur supportable, à peine gênante quand elle aspire l’air chaud.’ The changes in narrative style, the shifts in time and space are well handled by Claire Etcherelli

and *Un Arbre voyageur* is a much more coherent novel than *A propos de Clémence*.

Claire Etcherelli had originally intended her three novels to be a trilogy entitled *Des Années noires*. There was a common thematic link between them and they covered developments in French society and politics from the fifties to the seventies. Another link was the character Anna, who appears in all three. In *A propos de Clémence* she appears as a friend of Clémence, and in *Un Arbre voyageur* she is the narrator of the first part of the novel. In an interview in the *Quinzaine littéraire* (16–30 June 1978) Claire Etcherelli explained that: 'Anna correspond à quelque chose qui me fascine: l'idée qu'on puisse se dépasser et qu'on puisse arriver à ce que dit Anna: savoir qui on est, se posséder de partout.' This search for self-knowledge, for an identity, is at the centre of Claire Etcherelli's writing. It involves both a journey inward towards self-knowledge and a reaching out towards others. In the end an identity can only be achieved through solidarity with others, which in turn demands involvement in the common struggle against those forces in society which destroy human dignity. Claire Etcherelli's way of engaging in that struggle is by writing, though, as she says, she is 'sceptique sur le rôle de l'écriture, sur la puissance du livre…. Mais il n'est pas inutile de témoigner de ce qu'a pu être la condition réelle des individus dans une situation politique donnée' (ibid.).

## FRANCE AND ALGERIA, 1830–1962

Charles X, anxious to give his lack-lustre regime some prestige, decided to seize Algiers, which at the time was loosely under Turkish authority. On 5 July 1830 General Beaumont's force landed at Siddi Ferruch and thus began France's involvement with Algeria. Years of sporadic fighting followed until in 1847 the main indigenous resistance forces led by Abd-el-Kader were finally defeated, though the country was not fully pacified until 1871. It is important to note that the people of Algeria, then as now, are not of one race though they share a common faith, Islam. The majority are Arabs but a sizeable minority, some 20 per cent of the population, are Berbers (themselves a multi-racial group) the original people of North Africa before the Arab conquest. In the nineteenth century there was also a strong Jewish community, most of whom were descendants of Jews who had settled in North Africa after they were driven out of Spain in 1492. After 1870 the Jews were given full French citizenship, the Muslims were not. The European settlers,

the *colons,* used the diversity of the Muslim population— fostering animosities between Arabs and Berbers—to divide and rule.

Three waves of French settlers arrived in Algeria. The first were republican insurrectionists sent there in 1848. The second came in 1871 after France's defeat by Prussia and the loss of Alsace-Lorraine. The third came after an outbreak of phylloxera in 1880 had devastated the wine-producing areas of France. A census taken in 1872 showed that there were 245,000 European settlers in Algeria: French, Italian and Spanish. To meet their demands vast tracts of the best land in the coastal regions were appropriated and distributed to them.

With the great increase in the number of settlers came political and administrative changes. An administration on the French model took over from the army most of the running of the country. The littoral was divided into three *départements,* Oran, Algiers, Constantine, while the southern region, mostly desert, was still administered by the army. The *départements,* like those in France, were run by a prefect appointed by the government in Paris. The *communes,* the smallest administrative units, had an elected mayor if there was a European majority or an appointed administrator if the majority was Muslim. Likewise, a French legal system was introduced. In overall charge of Algeria was the Governor-General, appointed by and responsible to the *Ministre de l'Intérieur* in Paris. The country was run in a way designed to serve the interests of the Europeans; for example, only they had the vote in general elections and could choose the deputies sent to Parliament in Paris (two deputies and one senator per *département*). In fact, from first to last the Europeans had a built-in majority in all representative institutions. Not only were Muslim voting rights very restricted, but Muslims were denied many of the other civil rights enjoyed by Europeans. Ninety per cent of Muslims were illiterate and the few who did go through the whole French education system frequently found themselves alienated from their own community and rejected by the Europeans. Commerce, industry and the professions were all almost exclusively a preserve of the *colons*.

In 1930 the Europeans celebrated one hundred years of French rule with great pomp and circumstance. The population was made up of 800, 000 *colons* and five million Muslims; Algeria seemed secure, politically stable and economically prosperous. But the surface calm belied the reality and the indif ference of the Europeans to the injustices of the system made them ignore the signs of mounting resentment and hostility. Perhaps the fact that the opposition was often bitterly divided also encouraged the *colons* not to take it seriously. In the twenties and

thirties it was split into three main strands. There were the cultural fundamentalists, whose single concern was that there should be no dilution of Muslim cultural identity, no erosion of Islamic faith and principles. They were therefore opposed not only to the French but, even more vehemently, to the second Muslim faction, mostly made up of the educated class, who sought equal rights and integration with Europeans. These educated Muslims had obtained all the European prerequisites for success only to find themselves denied access to the rewards. One of the leaders of this faction was Farhad Abbar, who, after 1940, was to move to the third group, those demanding independence. Significantly the independence movement drew its strength from the first wave of Muslim immigrants who went to France after the First World War.

In the 1930s some European politicians did try to introduce reforms. The modest proposals of the 1936 Viollette-Blum plan would have given citizenship to about 30,000 Muslims, that is, the educated minority and those with the highest economic stake in the existing structure. But even this was too much for the *colons* and the Bill was defeated. In 1944 General de Gaulle's provisional government tried to revive the principle of assimilation, but again it was rejected and on this occasion by both Muslims and Europeans. The Muslim population was firmly set on independence. There were two main reasons for this. The first and most obvious was the *colons'* refusal to concede anything, which had worsened the plight of the Muslims as their numbers grew and the resources available to them decreased. The second was the experience of the immigrant workers in France during the 1920s and 1930s which had convinced them that the idea of assimilation was an illusion. The racism they encountered, the difficulties of their existence in France—low wages, menial jobs, poor housing in the slums of the big cities, separation from their families—had not only made the immigrant workers resentful but had left them convinced that the only hope for Algeria was independence. And it is not surprising that many were attracted by the revolutionary, anti-colonial, anti-imperialist ideologies prevalent at the time.

When the Second World War ended there began a series of colonial wars and the success of these campaigns was to set an example for the Algerian nationalists. In this context the war in Indo-China was of particular significance; it showed what could be done and what could be won, it also showed that independence could only be won by total commitment to the force of arms. The Muslim demonstrations in Sétif in May 1945 had left 103 Europeans dead. In the savage reprisals which

followed some 40,000 Muslims were slaughtered, and after these events no amount of liberalization could stem the tide of Muslim opposition. A prophetic slogan appeared on walls throughout Algeria: 'La valise ou le cercueil.' The years between 1945 and 1954 were the lull before the storm.

The fall of Dien-Bien-Phu brought defeat for France and peace in Indo-China. Four months later on 1 November 1954 (All Saints' Day, when the *colons* were commemorating their dead) the Algerian war began. From the first it was clear that this was not going to be an outburst against colonial abuses. but a concerted campaign against French rule. The FLN *(Front de Libétration Nationale)* declared that its aim was full independence and the creation of an Islamic Algerian state. The French goverament was equally intransigent: Algeria was French and would remain French. The *Ministre de l'Intérieur,* François Mitterrand, sent in the army. The savagery which was to characterize the war was evident from the first.

In 1956 a new French government, headed by the socialist leader Guy Mollet, launched a military campaign designed to wipe out the insurgents. The number of conscripts sent to Algeria was increased, a policy that met with opposition in France, particularly after the massacre of a platoon of soldiers (twenty-two men) in May, at Palestro, a village some fifty miles south of Algiers. These killings, together with a wave of shootings and bombings in Algiers which killed forty-nine civilians, led to massive reprisals and to the 'Battle of Algiers' (which has since been made into a remarkable film by the Italian director, Gillo Pontecorvo). This 'battle', which was intended to wipe out the guerrillas in Algiers, was led by General Massu who commanded some 8000 men of the élite parachute corps, the most battle-hardened of the French army units. It marked an escalation in the war. It also demonstrated that the military felt able to conduct the war very much its own way, often with disregard, if not contempt, for the civil government. In October 1956 one of the leaders of the FLN, Ben Bella, was seized by the French and imprisoned. The manner of his capture caused an international incident. A Moroccan plane in which he was travelling with some companions was diverted to Algiers in flagrant breach of international law. In November, France and Britain embarked on the disastrous Suez war. The result was an increase in military support for the FLN from Egypt and Tunisia.

In 1957 the 'Battle of Algiers' was won with the capture of the guerrilla leader Saadi Yacef. The bombings ceased, but the methods used to bring about pacification were denounced as institutionalized

torture. The torture shocked France and brought world-wide condemnation. In France opposition to the Algerian war increased, whereas in Algeria the army and the Europeans grew more determined that there should be no sell-out. The conduct of the war was intensified and certain acts were committed which challenged, and at times openly flouted, the authority of the French government. In May the Mollet government fell and France was without a government for three weeks.

In February 1958 the French bombed the Tunisian border village of Sakiet, from which had come sporadic firing at French reconnaissance planes. The bombing flattened the village and killed eighty people, among them women and children. The incident caused an international outcry and precipitated a deep political crisis. In April the French government again fell and the nation was without a government for thirty-seven days. On 13 May, demonstrators in Algiers rioted and seized government buildings, demanding the recall of General de Gaulle. On 1 June de Gaulle became Prime Minister and three days later he was in Algiers making his famous 'Je vous ai compris' speech to the Europeans. In September the FLN formed its government in exile, the GPRA (Gouvernement Provisoire de la République Algérienne) presided over by Ferhat Abbas who promptly rejected de Gaulle's offer of 'la paix des braves'. Also in September the Fourth Republic came to an end, and the constitution of the new republic was accepted by referendum.

General de Gaulle became the first President of the Fifth Republic in January 1959 and secret negotiations were begun with the GPRA. In September, de Gaulle promised self-determination for Algeria; he realized that though the military war could be won, the political war was lost and thus there could be no military solution. In June the next peace talks at Melun with the FLN failed and in September there appeared the *Manifeste des 121,* a declaration against the Algerian war signed by 121 (later 200) leading figures in France, who urged conscripts to desert and thus hasten the end of what was seen as a war of repression and torture. In November de Gaulle declared: 'Un jour il y aura une République algérienne' and in December the United Nations passed a resolution supporting Algeria's right to independence. A referendum in France in January 1961 approved the government's proposals for Algerian self-determination. At the same time the extremist European terrorist organization, the OAS (Organisation de l'Armée Secrète) was created by *colons* and army officers opposed to the peace settlement, with the aim of eliminating all those considered to be the enemies of *Algérie française*. The OAS began a bombing

campaign in Algeria and attempted to assassinate de Gaulle. In April, four generals attempted a putsch in Algiers, but the army did not back them. De Gaulle declared a state of emergency and the generals were arrested. The OAS increased its terror campaign in 1962, killing all those (Europeans and Muslims) deemed suspect. In February 553 people were killed. At the same time the OAS launched a terror campaign in France. The first victim was a four-year-old girl, blinded by a bomb intended for André Malraux. This outrage provoked massive protest demonstration in Paris. The marchers gathered in the Place de la Bastille. There were clashes with the police, who responded violently, killing eight demonstrators outside the Charonne *métro* station. Half a million people marched in silent protest at the funeral of the eight victims. In March, at Evian, in the second round of peace talks with the FLN an agreement was reached. A cease-fire followed, and in April a referendum approved the terms of the peace treaty. In July 1962 Algeria was declared independent and on 15 September, Ben Bella became the first President of Algeria.

### *Social and economic changes in France 1945–1958*

Colonial wars in Indo-China and Algeria dominated French politics throughout the fifties, divided the nation and finally brought down the Fourth Republic. But the political traumas of twenty-four governments in thirteen years, the savagery of the wars, the terrorism and the collapse of the Fourth Republic, should not mask the fact that other significant changes were occurring in France over the period. Profound economic, social and cultural changes were taking place in the country. The flfteen years between 1945 and 1960 were a time of reconstruction on every level following the physical, material and moral devastation of World War Two.

Perhaps the most successful element of the reconstruction was France's economic revival. The foundations of what was to become the 'economic miracle' of the sixties, were laid in the preceding decade by the skilful management of administrators who facilitated expansion, investment, research and the development of new industries. One consequence of the economic revival was a constant need for labour, which was largely met by bringing in foreign workers, mostly from North Africa but also from other parts of Europe (Italy, Spain and later Portugal). There was also considerable internal 'immigration' as French people moved from the provinces to the new industrial zones in or around the cities. Not only did more and more people find themselves in

an alien environment, cut off from their roots, living in difficult conditions (aggravated by a chronic housing shortage), but they were doing dreary, repetitive, arduous work, dictated by the demands of mass production. And it was the Algerians who were at the bottom of the industrial and social hierarchy.

In the huge manufacturing plants relations between workers were strained; the demands of production, the organization of labour and the system of rewards exacerbated racial tension. And for the Algerians there were the added tensions caused by a brutal war. Hostility, anger and fear often turned into violence. And every political crisis and catastrophe only made things worse. This is the context of *Elise ou la vraie vie*.

### *Immigration*

Contrary to popular belief, the Algerians were not the largest group of immigrants in France during the 1950s. Indeed, not until 1982, when their numbers rose to 795,000, did they become so. In 1954 the two biggest groups of immigrants were the Italians and the Spaniards, numbering 507,000 and 288,000 respectively. There were only 211,000 Algerians. By 1962 the figures were: 629,000 Italians; 441,000 Spaniards; 350,000 Algerians.

Between 1946 and 1954 there was a tenfold increase in immigration in France, but despite the fact that there were fewer Algerians than Italians or Spaniards, they seemed more numerous because of their immediately visible differences of race and culture. The Italians or Spaniards, though foreign, were still Latins and Catholics; the Algerians were aliens.

The Algerians were invariably given dirty, arduous and low-paid jobs. Most of them were unskilled workers in heavy industry, production-line hands in car plants, or labourers on construction sites. They congregated where the jobs were, in the large conurbations of Paris, Lille, Lyons, Marseilles. They could only obtain and afford the worst housing and lived in ghettos, often in conflict with the French poor who had been unable to move out as they moved in. Furthermore, from 1954 until the Evian peace treaty in 1962, Algerians were suspect, they were the enemy within. They were subjected to constant police surveillance, rounded-up, frequently arrested and deported, or they simply ‘disappeared’. As the war intensified Algerian workers also came under pressure from the FLN. They had to contribute to war funds and were subjected to a strict disciplinary code as the movement sought

to alienate them still further from the French. One example of this code was the imposition of Islamic principles forbidding the use of alcohol and tobacco. It was as dangerous for an Algerian, vis-à-vis his own people, to fraternize with a French person as it was for a French person to fraternize with someone whom the popular press always represented as a fifth columnist. Thus, Elise and Arezki found themselves under suspicion and pressure from both sides. Such friendships were so rare that they stood out and made the couple highly vulnerable. It was a particularly dangerous situation for Arezki, since the main priority for an Algerian working in France in the 1950s was to remain anonymous.

## OVERVIEW

When *Elise ou la vraie vie* first came out the author attracted as much attention as the novel. It was as if many reviewers needed to find some way to explain how someone from Claire Etcherelli's background had managed to write such a powerful and accomplished work. Much was made of the autobiographical parallels between author and heroine and critics tended to emphasize the documentary aspects of the novel: its depiction of the living and working conditions of the poor, the unskilled and the immigrants. The novel's authenticity was widely praised but it was attributed to the fact that the novel was a record of the writer's own experiences. It would be foolish to deny that Claire Etcherelli drew on her personal experience for her novel, but the way the raw material is handled makes *Elise ou la vraie vie* a work of the imagination, skilfully crafted, varied and subtle in its treatment of character, theme and narrative.

The novel is not anecdotal, it does not merely illustrate aspects of working-class life in the 1950s. Its documentary aspect serves a wider purpose than that of simply conveying information; the novel is not a slice of life. The naturalistic details are not ends in themselves, they are an integral part of the novel's thematic structure. Work practices, racial prejudice, the abuse of police powers, terrorism, are all political themes —very relevant and obvious ones in France in the late 1950s. However, the author does not treat them in any programmatic way, she does not set out to prove a case, but rather challenges the social and political values which sustain prejudices of all kinds. Her aim is to engage the reader in a debate on issues about the relationship between society and the individual, and these issues are not confined to the historical context of the novel; they are very much alive today. The details—factual,

historical and social—are presented in a series of images and build up the social and political context within which the characters live. We are given many details about car production, wages, working conditions, the noise, the smell, the organization of the plant and so on, but these details are not there because the author is primarily interested in car production, but are used to convey the experience of those who are subjected to the conditions described. The factory, the production line are gigantic, strangely alive and sinister and above all powerful compared with the vulnerable and subservient human beings. We are led to reflect on what such conditions do to people and the world of the car plant comes to symbolize the wider social and political organization of society.

Claire Etcherelli's characters are not mere case-studies. She attaches great importance to creating characters who are individuals; this applies to Elise and all with whom she has a personal relationship, and even to minor characters. There are no stereotypes. One of the themes in her novels is the way society thrives on stereotypes, dogma and prejudice, all to the detriment of the individual. No character in *Elise ou la vraie vie* is there merely to illustrate some social or political point.

A first-person narration creates certain problems for the novelist. It restricts the point of view and limits the action to events in the narrator's life. In Part One Elise leads a narrowly circumscribed life and the reader could easily be subjected to the same monotony. However, Claire Etcherelli avoids this; Elise's narrative is more than a passive record of her life in Bordeaux, it reflects the dawning of her self-awareness, the outward monotony of Elise's life is contrasted with her inward emotional, intellectual and moral awakening. The manner of the narration does raise the question of the narrator's reliability. Is Elise telling the truth? In a first-person novel subjectivity is unavoidable and we at least have to believe Elise is not deliberately trying to mislead. Claire Etcherelli introduces certain details to suggest that Elise is being honest in her account. Anna's letter, Lucien's *Cahier,* other people's remarks about Arezki, such details as these corroborate Elise's judgements. The advantages of having a first-person narrator are that it gives a sense of immediacy and authenticity to the narrative and allows the author to show Elise growing in self-awareness through her relationships with others and through her own changing understanding of her experience without authorial commentary.

The novel is carefully structured. Parts One and Two follow a similar pattern: a slow opening, increasing activity leading to a breakdown in relationships and ending with Elise alone. The pattern is repeated but it

is also contrasted; in Part Two the tempo is faster, the action more complex and at the end, although Elise's loss is irrevocable, she is defiant and resilient, determined to meet the challenges which confront her.

*Elise ou la vraie vie* cannot be reduced to some convenient literary genre. It is neither a documentary, proletarian nor feminist novel. Elements of all three categories are present, but Claire Etcherelli has successfully combined them in a way which takes her novel beyond the limits of any single category. She has written a work of aesthetic and moral interest. We are encouraged to make our own mind up and to resist the temptation to label.

## ELISE AND LUCIEN

'Surtout ne pas penser.' The opening words of the novel express Elise's dilemma at the end of a process of learning to think for herself, about herself, about her life. Her story is the story of her awakening to others, to work, to love, to politics, to history, to death, but above all to herself. The emotional, intellectual, sensual and spiritual awakening necessitates thought and brings joy, sorrow, a sense of freedom and a terrible responsibility to act upon the insights revealed by her experience.

Her awakening is slow and indeed for the twenty-seven years of her life spent in Bordeaux—the period covered in Part One of the novel—she resists it. During this time she is essentially concerned with protecting herself and creating an existence within a narrow physical, intellectual, emotional and moral environment, conditions which are designed to shut out all that is unpredictable or unfamiliar: 'Sécurité. J'aimais ce mot et ce qu'il évoquait… Il remplaçait le mot bonheur' (p. 97). The 'sécurité' is founded on her brother Lucien, but his desires and ambitions progressively run counter to her need and the growing distance between them provokes changes in her which slowly break up the passive, dormant existence in which she was seeking refuge.

Biographical details are rapidly outlined in the opening pages. There is no reference to parents or any close relative other than the grandmother, and we see from this both how intensely Elise loves her brother and how emotionally deprived she is. What emerges from these pages is her isolation. She is solitary and vulnerable and seeks to protect herself through the protectiveness with which she surrounds her brother. She delights in the role of sister-mother and at this stage in her life tacitly endorses the grandmother's philosophy of homely fatalism: 'Le Bon Dieu a une grande louche et il sert tout le monde' (p. 57).

Despite having 'ni vocation, ni ambition' (p. 57) Elise is bright, resourceful, resilient, perceptive and brave, and we see her develop as the circumstances of her life change and as she rises to the challenge. The changes are invariably brought about by Lucien, who dominates Part One. Elise has no life of her own, no desires beyond being with him, caring for him and seeing that he is happy within the confines of her possessiveness: 'Je continuai à vouloir le conduire' (p. 56). She clings to him because he gives her life purpose and meaning. Lucien's growing need for independence clashes with Elise's desire to retain a state of mutual dependency. Various individuals enter Lucien's life, each one disrupting Elise's life more profoundly.

First there is Henri, then Marie-Louise—and with her comes the feeling that 'quelque chose…allait définitivement m'échapper' (p. 67)—then, disastrously, there is Anna: 'A partir d'elle tout changea' (p. 77). As Lucien detaches himself from her, as he exploits her, Elise begins to see her life and the world about her differently; she too changes, she develops new levels of awareness which will be rapidly expanded and enriched in Paris. In this sense, Lucien's relationships act as catalysts: they erode Elise's longing for security, they challenge her static view of herself and of life.

Elise is first aware of her brother's rage for independence when, at the age of fourteen, he becomes fascinated by Henri and passionate about roller-skating. The latter symbolizes his desires for self-expression, his longing to be free, to flee, and Elise senses this longing as she secretly watches him: 'Je l'aperçus seul dans le brouillard glacé… les patins aux pieds…je le regardai…je devinai son bonheur, ce vagabondage dans la brume…la sensation de la liberté retrouvée' (p. 58). The turning point for Lucien and Elise comes when Lucien, frustrated and peeved at not having been chosen for a starring part in the gym display in the school games, deliberately falls from the bar in the gym and is severely injured. During his convalescence he seems to become dependent on Elise once more, but his intensive reading of left-wing newspapers, magazines and books makes him aware of his dissatisfaction with his life and of his need for some form of liberation and self-affirmation, some grand gesture to break out of his prison: 'J'étais comme un être enfermé dans une bulle de verre…ce que je voulais, c'était casser la bulle pour que quelqu'un m'écoute' (p. 65).

Elise herself feels 'une sensation d'être envasée' (p. 64) and she too begins to see the world through new eyes as she reads the books that Lucien leaves lying around, 'Je lisais et se levaient les voiles épais' (p. 69). Her reading makes her call into question 'cette gymnastique bien

réglée' (p. 68) which has been her life. She is frightened by what she reads: 'les lectures de Lucien me troublaient. Avec une logique terrible, ces écrits dénonçaient tout ce qui m'avait paru naturel' (p. 69). What is significant here is Elise's new awareness of herself, of her life, and her critical attitude to what she reads; in other words, she is beginning to think for herself and with this new consciousness come new responsibilities. She recognizes this new awareness: 'Je vis ma condition, j'en devins fière' (p. 69). This new-found sense of herself marks a major development in her consciousness and sharpens her social awareness, so that when she goes to work in the car factory she can distance herself to a certain extent from the conditions she encounters there.

Elise's love for her brother never ceases, but it does not cloud her judgement of his actions or her understanding of his motives. She is lucid about his fundamental egoism, his child-like self-centredness, his need to gratify his every desire immediately and his rage and sulking when he cannot. His life is a series of histrionic gestures. Ironically, Lucien sees himself as a victim, which is also how Henri (the fake revolutionary) sees him: 'I'image même de la victime d'un système… cette belle figure creuse sortie des archives de la Révolution d'Octobre' (p. 81). His rhetoric masks the shallowness of his thoughts; for example he writes to Elise: 'Je me suis trouvé dans la nécessité matérielle d'accepter un boulot pénible, mais combien exaltant. Je vais me mêler aux vrais combattants, partager la vie inhumaine des ouvriers d'usine' (p. 97)—fine words which are not substantiated by his actions. He does not work hard at the factory and he shares very little, indeed we never see Lucien give anything emotionally or materially. It is not that he is hypocritical, but rather that he is locked into a pattern of self-dramatization which he mistakes for commitment and action. His grand declaration: 'je témoignerai, pour ceux qui ne peuvent le faire' is never carried out. It is significant that Lucien is neither liked nor trusted by his fellow workers. For example there is the incident which occurs when he is haranguing the workers after the bombing of Sakiet. As he evokes the children's suffering a man calls out, 'Dis donc, c'est toi qui nous causes comme ça? Est-ce que c'est pas toi, par hasard, qui as lâché ta femme et ton gosse… Qu'estce que tu viens nous faire de la morale' (p. 241). Lucien considers that his private life does not come into such matters: 'Qu'est-ce que ma vie personnelle vient faire ici?' he asks. But, as the man replies: 'Ça fait beaucoup, mon vieux!' And we learn that Lucien has been cheating Marie-Louise of the child allowance and using the money to buy himself and Anna a new record-player and new books (p.

242). Since he considers himself to be superior, Lucien does not see why he should be bound by notions of responsibility or honesty. His ideas remain abstractions since the values he ostensibly defends are never borne out by his actions.

Lucien's moral weakness is apparent from his treatment of Elise, Marie-Louise, Anna and the grandmother, all of whom, to a greater or lesser extent, love him and depend upon him. He exploits them emotionally and financially and he betrays them. He betrays Marie-Louise most cruelly and callously, he betrays Anna when he abandons her to move to Paris, and his repeated betrayals of Elise culminate in his casual revelation of her relationship with Arezki. In all these instances he is convinced that his actions mark his superior independence, and that their reactions are a measure of their sentimentality, their conformity and hence of their inferiority.

In the end Elise recognizes that Lucien is a sad, pathetic figure, but her love is such that she does not reject him. She feels pity without condescension. His death is an ironic commentary on his wasted life. He chased after images and sensations, mistook gestures for actions and his commitment was swallowed up by the cynicism that Elise had detected from the first, 'Je le trouvais cynique, rusé' (p. 57). Lucien's life is a series of humiliations. He is motivated by a bitter anger, a self-destructive energy which can only be fed by sensations and which cripples and perverts all his relationships. Throughout his futile life Lucien is 'sans amarres' (p. 81), adrift not on a voyage of discovery or fulfilment but a downward spiral of destruction into which he seeks to drag others. The final line of the newspaper report of his death is an ironic epitaph: 'On ignore pourquoi le jeune malade s'enfuyait en pleine nuit et quelle était sa destination' (p. 269).

Elise's reflections on his death pick up the irony: 'Là dans ce plat paysage, avait fini l'aventure de sa vie. Vie manquée, mort dérisoire. Les jeunes héros du siècle mouraient au volant dans les fracas de leurs bolides et lui se tuait sur un solex' (p. 273).[1] And her final comment on what might have been Lucien's response, mimics his warped indifference: 'Et alors? aurait-il dit de sa voix caustique. Et après?' (p. 273). Lucien was always running away, without ever knowing what he was running towards; he never knew his 'destination'. He dies as he had lived, accidentally.